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The archives of the Jennifer Flay gallery join the Archives de la critique  
d'art

**Jean-Marc Huitorel**

Translator: Simon Pleasance

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/15370>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.15370

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

**Publisher**

Grouperment d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 15 November 2014

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

**Electronic reference**

Jean-Marc Huitorel, « *A Crisis – A Period – A Gallery* », *Critique d'art* [Online], 43 | Automne 2014, Online since 15 November 2015, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/15370> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.15370>

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This text was automatically generated on 10 December 2020.

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### EDITOR'S NOTE

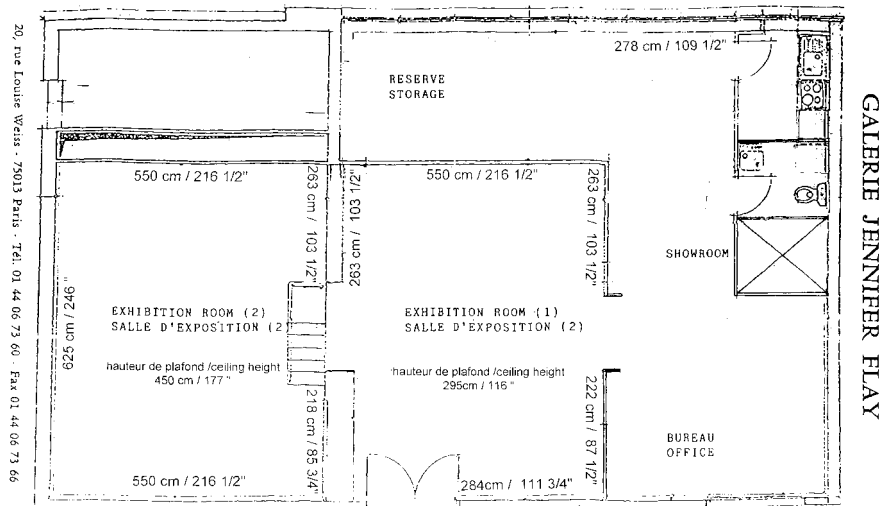
The Galerie Jennifer Flay collection is the latest arrival to join the collections of the Archives de la critique d'art. Here it finds its place alongside not only archival collections and critics' writings, but also collections of institutions informed by critics, like those of the Paris Biennale, and several art centres (Le Crestet, la Criée, 40mcube, and Kerguéhennec). It would be illusory to think that all we need to do is consult artists' archival collections in order to study their works, consult critics' archives in order to appreciate the role of criticism, and consult galleries' collections in order to be acquainted with the details of the art market. The art world is made up of a tangled confusion of galaxies in which suns, planets, satellites and comets all interact. There are examples of interdependent communities, and there are effects of gravitation, woven together in an unequal but real way in a world where academe also plays a part. In the collection and distribution of archives, a well-honed sociologist, for example, might detect forms of community that are either displayed or hidden, and it would be a welcome development if researchers of his ilk would make capital out of documents accumulated during the activities of this or that player.

If, in Cologne, the Zadik centre -Das Zentralarchiv des internationalen Kunsthandels- has set itself the goal of conserving art market archives, in Rennes, the Archives de la critique d'art are, for their part, and to put it in words of one syllable, so to speak, focusing on the symbolic reception of works and galleries, rather than on market values. This difference means that alongside dossiers held by Jennifer Flay, Fabienne Leclerc (Galerie des archives, 1989-1998) and Gilles Dusein (Urbi & Orbi, 1989-1993), we find the writings of those who have commented on the works presented. The proximity is advantageous and

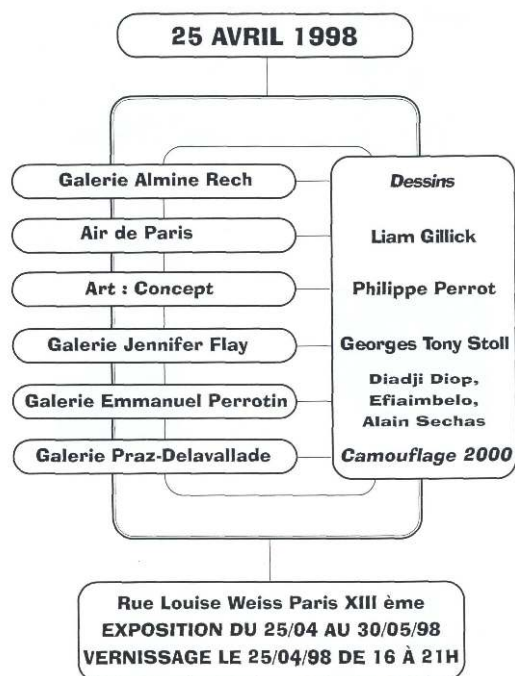
will not prevent researchers from working on purchases made by the State and Regional Contemporary Art Collections (FRACs), and gauging a different time-frame of reception between public purchasers, the private market, and criticism following artists' careers. The interest of the Galerie Jennifer Flay collection lies, as Jean-Marc Huitorel notes, in the commitments made during the 1990s to artists who are nowadays widely recognized. Jean-Marc Huitorel has shared some of her choices, and he makes reference to them here. So before being a cold, scientific tool, these archives and the forms of community which are revealed here are, above all, the living memory of a recent past. It is up to the curious, amateurs and professionals alike, to discover them.

Jean-Marc Poinot

- 1 Between 1991 and 2002, the Jennifer Flay gallery in Paris successively occupied two premises, one at N° 7 rue Debelleye (3<sup>rd</sup> arrondissement), the other at N° 20 rue Louise Weiss (13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement). The leases and refurbishment bills, associative statutes and banking and administrative correspondence all, needless to say, are a major part of the gallery's archival collection, as for any business. But the most living documents as far as art history is concerned are obviously those to do with the artists involved, the connection with their dealers, their shows, their (differing) commercial successes, and so on. The history of the Jennifer Flay gallery is also the history of a French adventure in the 1990s, which saw young galleries, led by Bruno Delavallade (Praz-Delavallade gallery), shaken by the crisis and looking for less costly premises, setting up shop in 1997 in Rue Louise Weiss in the 13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, whose mayor at the time was Jacques Toubon (who was Minister of Culture between 1993 and 1995). Air de Paris, Art: Concept, Emmanuel Perrotin, Almine Rech and one or two others over the years managed to develop a model of collaboration (especially where communications were concerned), which has since set a trend and attracted a following. More specifically, the Jennifer Flay collection illustrates the wealth of a "stable" which, by evolving over the years, is still typical of the 1990s. With hindsight, the choices made by the director seem like so many symptoms of a period, inasmuch as they say a great deal about the state of art which, as we all know, reflects the state of the world. If the decision to open a gallery was taken before the art market crashed in the late 1990s, it seems obvious that the works that Jennifer Flay chooses to show in her gallery are to some extent the consequence of that crash. For example, the rare painters she exhibits (Lisa Milroy and John Currin) deal with that object of speculation of the previous decade in a way that is, at the very least, ironical. As if they were henceforth suspicious of "heavy" objects, several of the gallery's artists are veering towards new technologies and de-materialization, producing volatile and even stealthy objects (Xavier Veilhan, Marylène Negro), working their way into the social arena by way of subtle gestures, often site-specific or *in situ* (Felice Varini). When they use apparently traditional media (Alain Séchas, Michel François, Jean-Jacques Rullier, Claude Closky, Georges Tony Stoll), they lighten the mass by having recourse either to publishing, or to drawing, or to systems for reading the world based on play and restriction.



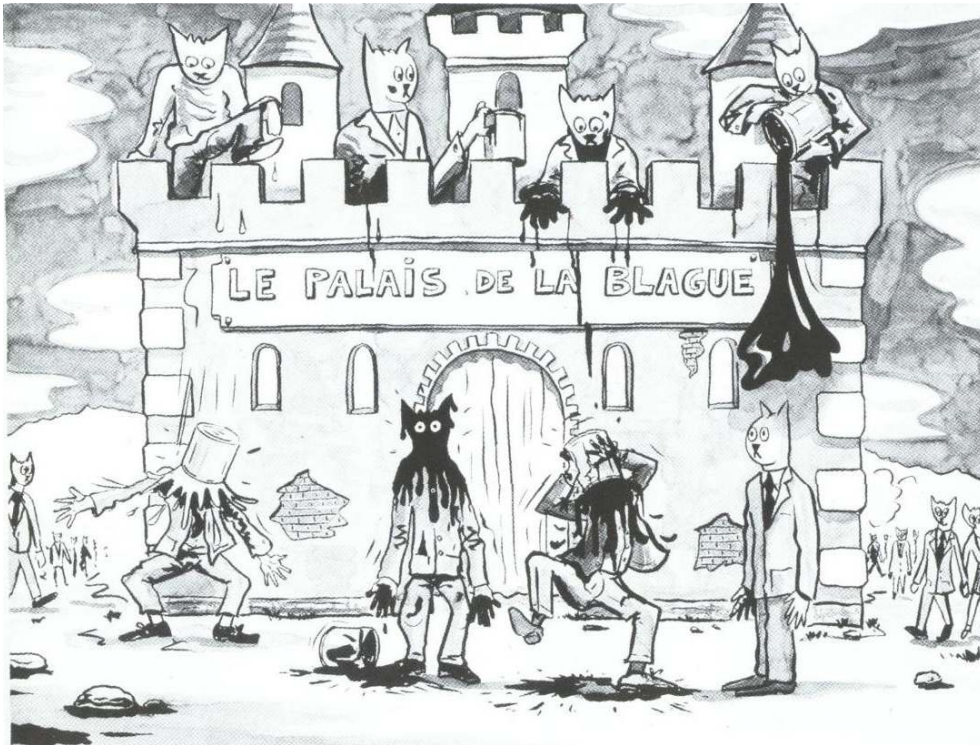
Plan of the gallery at 20 rue Louise Weiss, 75013 Paris © Galerie Jennifer Flay



Programme of the Rue Louise Weiss galleries, 25 April 1998 © Galerie Jennifer Flay

- 2 From the earliest days of its activity, the Jennifer Flay gallery has represented the northern Irish artist Willie Doherty, a photographer whom we might describe as conceptual, if such an oxymoron passes muster. But his idea, as such significant of the 1990s, marks a renewed interest in the political question (the Anglo-Irish conflict, but not

just that), a sort of comeback of history painting revisited by technology and by new agencies of visibility, trace and surveillance. To date, his oeuvre has been ceaselessly asserted in the art context as one of the most powerful, while photography, in other respects, is tending to re-focus on its specific history and its distribution networks.



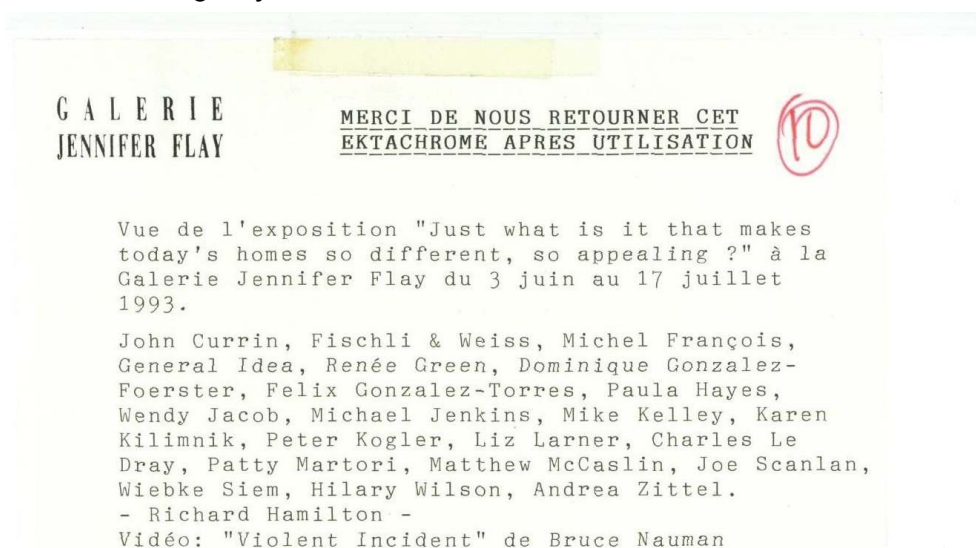
# ALAIN SÉCHAS

exposition du 29 avril au 10 juin 2000  
vernissage le 29 avril à partir de 16h00

Galerie Jennifer Flay 20 rue Louise Weiss 75013 Paris  
tel. 01 44 06 73 60 fax. 01 44 06 73 66 e.mail. [gjflay@club-internet.fr](mailto:gjflay@club-internet.fr)

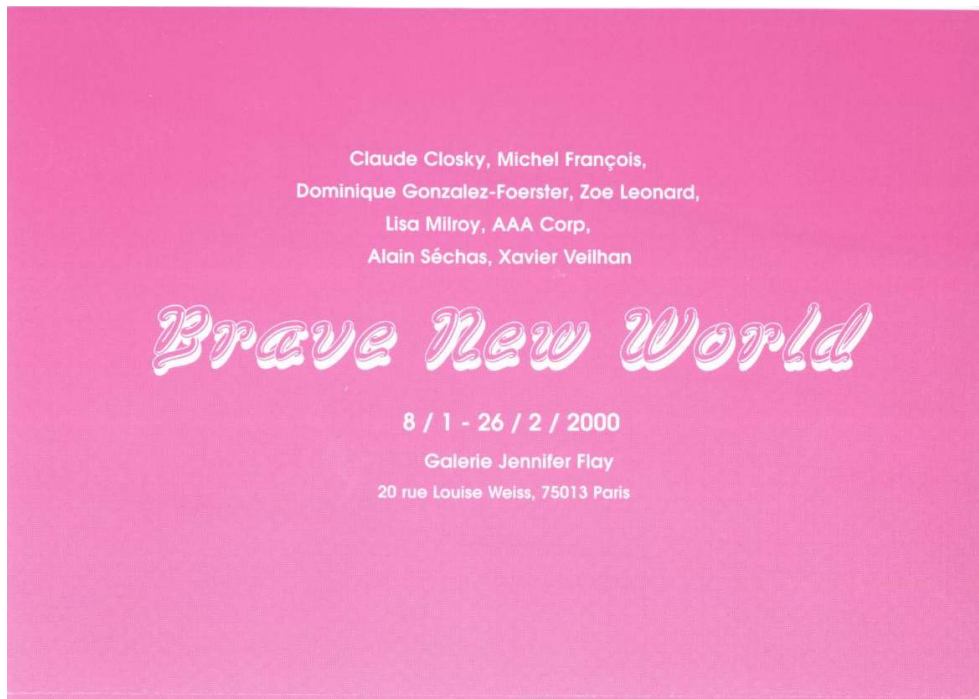
Alain Séchas, invitation for *Le Palais de la blague* (29 April-10 June 2000) [both sides] © Galerie Jennifer Flay

- 3 Yet a gallery, albeit an excellent one, is also both the witness of and player in moments of broad visibility followed by hollow periods in relation to artists' activities. We all remember that shock represented by the appearance of Richard Billingham's family photographs, which were at once very aesthetically-inclined, and very hard. He was much seen in the French art scene, precisely during his collaboration with the Jennifer Flay gallery, but has had a much lower profile for several years now.
- 4 The essence of the gallery's archives consists of artists' dossiers. In them we find both exchanges of correspondence (between artist and gallery, but also between the gallery and the various partners, museums and art centres, exhibition curators and collectors, sometimes lawyers in the event of disputes, and disputes there certainly were...), press articles, invitations, various bills and invoices, hanging plans, photographs of works and exhibitions, and plenty of other documents, all interesting in various respects. Many careers of important artists are marked by their time with Jennifer Flay. If French public collections possess major works by Michel François, Xavier Veilhan, Alain Séchas, John Currin, Claude Closky, Mélanie Counsell and Zoe Leonard, this is because there was a gallery in Paris which represented them, and worked to make them known, and have their works purchased.
- 5 In addition to the solo shows, Jennifer Flay regularly held group and theme exhibitions which in each instance expressed the preoccupations and orientations of the place and which, by presenting artists outside the gallery's "stable", produced a meaningful overview of the international art of the moment. So in *Not Quiet* (1992)<sup>1</sup> people saw works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres (the title was his idea); and in the much referenced *Just what is it that makes today's home so different, so appealing?* (1993)<sup>2</sup>, in addition to the gallery's artists there were works by General Idea, Renée Green, Wendy Jacob, Joe Scanlan and Andrea Zittel. *Body Beautiful* (2000)<sup>3</sup> showed work by John Coplans, Seydou Keita and Sarah Lucas, among others. And the fact that a show like *Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible* (2001)<sup>4</sup> managed to show most of the gallery's artists together proves, if need there were, the coherence of the gallery's choices.





Ektachrome illustrating a view of the exhibition *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* © Galerie Jennifer Flay



Detail of the invitation for *Brave New World* (8 January-26 February 2000) © Galerie Jennifer Flay

- 6 The fact that a contemporary art gallery should decide to deposit its archives with an institution like the Archives de la critique d'art also means that its founder is placing her activity under the eye of art criticism, and that the works, which she showed and championed, were subject just as much to the market game as to critical judgement. It just so happens that the beginnings of the Jennifer Flay gallery tally, more or less, with my own beginnings in art criticism. It also just so happens that, in no time, I was interested in the artists being exhibited by Jennifer Flay, artists who, as a result, represent a part of her archival collection. Even though I never actually wrote about Claude Closky, I approached his work at a very early stage, in the days of the Ripoulain Brothers, then at the precise moment when he shifted from a form of abstract painting to what has, since then, constituted the core of his work, that free Oulipian inspiration, which has become his way of reading and presenting the world. There is another artist, in some respects akin to Claude Closky, Jean-Jacques Rullier, with whom I have regularly worked, whose invitation to his show held in March-April 1993 I find in the box earmarked for him. His discretion keeps him away from the topical spotlights, but he is one of the most subtle and fair artists with whom I've had a chance to spend time. His consummate art of drawing, whereby he compiles an at once specific and shareable inventory of human practices, was preceded by the inventory of objects and images, usually in the form of collections and posters, which people could see in Rue Debelleye. In 1996 I met Marylène Negro at an exhibition organized by Guy Tortosa in Limerick, Ireland. Since then we have been pursuing a sort of ideal of what might be called an artist/critic guild, involving the organization of shows, the writing of texts, and ongoing exchanges. I recall, in particular, the show at the Jennifer Flay gallery in 2001 where she showed the *Eux/Them* series, disturbing portraits of mannequins taken in shop windows.

This work is emblematic of a period which negotiated hard with the appearances of reality, inventing for itself the wherewithal for doing just that, and constantly varying the angles of attack. In my eyes, Marylène Negro is a major artist and the many views here of her exhibitions are the witnesses of a time of renewal and positioning, in which respect another gallery artist, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, is still one of the best known. I did not spend much time with Alain Séchas when he was present at the Jennifer Flay gallery, but since the early 2000s he has been one of those artists whose work I keep a very close eye on. I am persuaded that what he was then doing, with that drawn and sculpted world of sceptical cats, is today being extended with powerful coherence in his abstract paintings. Through the questions they are posing with regard to art, its attitudes and its forms, he, like Marylène Negro, and like others whom I am discovering in this archival collection, make those 1990s a melting pot, in which the 2000s and 2010s, which have turned towards other horizons, are still nurturing themselves.



## NOTES

1. *Not Quiet* (Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Liz Larner, Christian Marclay and Matthew McCaslin), 21 March-25 April 1992
2. *Just what is it that makes today's home so different, so appealing?* (John Currin, Michel François, General Idea, Renée Green, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Paula Hayes, Wendy Jacob, Michael Jenkins, Karen Kilimnik, Peter Kogler, Liz Larner, Charles Ledray, Patty Martori, Matthew McCaslin, Joe Scanlan, Wiebke Siem, Hilary Wilson, Andrea Zittel – with Fischli & Weiss and *Violent Incident* by Bruce Nauman), 3 June-17 July 1993
3. *Body Beautiful* (Richard Billingham, John Coplans, Angus Fairhurst, Michel François, Seydou Keita, Sean Landers, Zoe Leonard, Sarah Lucas, Malick Sidibé), 15 June-29 July 2000
4. Anniversary show celebrating the first ten years of the Jennifer Flay gallery.